



Piquing Our Worst Fears

Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America by Paula S. Fass

Review by: Patrick J. Ryan

Reviews in American History, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Sep., 1999), pp. 470-476

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30031087>

Accessed: 22/01/2015 10:47

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Patrick J. Ryan

Paula S. Fass. *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. ix + 324 pp. Notes and index. \$27.00.

If you go onto the World Wide Web you will find dozens of virtual places dedicated to helping people cope with and solve cases of child abduction. The organizations running these sites are supported by a long list of corporations and they work in concert with public agencies. Their websites show photographs of hundreds of children whose fates are unknown. Some pages tell saddening stories of stolen, molested, murdered children and youths, but others do not give such details because we know too many similar stories already. Many report success stories of found children, provide information on what to do if your child is missing, and link you through hypertext to state or federal authorities. They help connect individual families with a worldwide system of information, but they also warn us to teach our children to be ever cautious. Tell them: don't go out alone, don't help people unknown to you, don't assume you're safe in familiar surroundings, and don't trust strangers. These rules contribute to our insecurity about public places. They should cause us to pause and to think about how we perceive threats to our children's well-being and the consequences of our responses to these threats.

Paula Fass helps us contemplate how we perceive threats to our children in *Kidnapped*. She suggests that the stories that Americans have told and heard about kidnapping over the last 120 years have focused our efforts upon bizarre and horrific possibilities, but also upon the most infrequent and intractable of dangers that face our young (pp. 6–7, 262–63). As a result, we have oversimplified our sense of responsibility for vulnerable people. Worse still, the mass production of stories about abducted, tormented, and murdered children have allowed us to “substitute thrill for social commitment.” Always after profit, the makers of mass media keenly fashioned kidnapping stories like “ride[s] at an amusement park, frightening and entertaining us at the same time” (p. 8). The commercial success of kidnapping stories has intensified our fear of strangers, impoverished public life, and fortified our sense that families are the only havens in a heartless world. Is this why, at a time when Americans accept the mass removal of welfare support from

children, websites dedicated to kidnapping outnumber those dedicated to child poverty by three to one? On another level, one might wonder about the social consequences of discourse on the web. Surely, it increases the speed and number of transactions between those dealing with child abduction, but it simultaneously reduces these links to a safe, prophylactic form.

In the broadest sense, *Kidnapped* argues that publicity from a century of kidnapping cases helped transform our most basic social relations. Fass acknowledges that the acts of abducting, murdering, or abusing children were not new, but she argues that such acts achieved a new cultural salience and that their meanings were transformed. The book successfully advances this overarching point, and I can offer only a few general critiques. Too frequently Fass takes newspaper accounts at face value when it seems inappropriate. She never discusses how the consumption of mass media operates. She frequently uses quotes from newspapers as if to document generally held opinions or experiences. She evokes the phrases, "the public mind" or "the public image" as if they were singular, unambiguous things (pp. 155, 207). In a book about shifting cultural meanings, the general absence of an effort to uncover contests between groups over those meanings seems odd. These methodological assumptions recall to my mind the works of scholars such as Marvin Meyers and Daniel Boorstin. Readers should ask themselves whether this book is part of a "new cultural" history, or if it is a return to the "social-intellectual" history of the 1950s. At some key junctures Fass' claims push well beyond or oversimplify her evidence. Another general problem emerges from the fact that the book does not explicitly address current historical or policy debates regarding childhood, abuse, or mass media. Nor does it make use of secondary literature as well as it might. This makes it more difficult to gauge the book's significance and reduces its impact.

Yet, these criticisms should not allow one to overlook the work's strengths. *Kidnapped* is a compelling book and it confronts important questions in creative ways. Through a series of dramatic case studies Fass helps us feel and understand how widely publicized abduction stories created a carnivalesque atmosphere that contributed to new fears about urban strangers and helped redefine the threats to our children. The book is the only major historical study of kidnapping in America. This topic may seem narrow at first glance, but Fass reconstructs specific cases in order to reveal broadly shared cultural elements. In so doing, she raises important questions in the history of psychological science, social deviance, law, domestic relations, and the construction of childhood. The first half of *Kidnapped* focuses upon three infamous cases from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the abductions of Charlie Ross in 1874, Bobby Franks in 1924, and Charles

Lindbergh Jr. in 1932. In the second half, Fass explores post-WWII stories about infertile women taking babies from nurseries and sexually predatory men molesting girls and boys, parental abduction as a strategy in custody disputes, and finally she traces the rise of a vigorous missing children's movement in the 1980s. This essay will evaluate each of the book's chapters in terms of the general critiques given above.

Soon after his disappearance in Philadelphia in 1874, Charley Ross became known nationally as "the lost boy." He was taken for ransom at the age of four never to be found. According to Fass, this crime story helped define the opposition between a childhood sheltered in the home and childhood exploited in the city. Although Fass overstates her case when she claims that, because it emphasized the father's role in protecting his children, "Charley's story had reinvented the family circle," this chapter identifies the key questions that haunted Charley's father and fascinated the nation for many years. Would Charley remember who he was if he lived? And who would he grow to become? The prospect that Charley was "lost," not just to his parents or even to the world, but to his own self was horrifying. It is not surprising that years later more than one troubled person, perhaps struggling to find their own selves, came to authorities claiming to be Charley Ross, the return of the lost boy.

In the next chapter, Fass analyzes the case of Bobby Franks who was murdered by Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold in 1924. This case helped develop a new plot of sexual perversion in modern kidnapping stories. Unlike Charley's captors, the wealthy, educated, and fashionable Leopold and Loeb did not kidnap Franks for economic gain. Apparently they did so for the sheer excitement of killing the boy, and it was widely presumed that sexual motives were also present. They issued the ransom note only after Franks was murdered. It served as a means of continuing the titillation of a crime whose rational economic motive was missing. During the trial, newer psychological explanations of why Leopold and Loeb killed their victim were used to defend them. Psychiatric experts pronounced the slayers "abnormal" victims of their own childhoods, and thus claimed they were less than responsible for the murder. This reasoning ran counter to simpler notions of individual responsibility. However, the presiding judge declared that he was unmoved by the psychiatric diagnoses, and that only the convicted young men's ages (eighteen and nineteen) allowed him sentence them to life in prison rather than death. The letter of this ruling aside, Fass claims that in reading about Leopold and Loeb, "Americans learned to define in terms of disease those behaviors that had previously been immoral or unnatural" (p. 90). This seems to be an overstatement at best. Clearly psychiatric lan-

guage entered the legal and mass media domains as a powerful new discourse, but it does not appear to me that it replaced the dominant and older explanations for violence. Yet, the more important questions about Fass' interpretation of the trial surround the meanings of her words "learned" and "Americans." Who learned what from the reports? Who was writing, who was reading, who learned from whom? By quoting freely from newspapers as if they were mirrors of common beliefs, Fass invokes the consensus ideal of the public mind. Cultural contests over the meanings given to cases can not be reconstructed with this way of reading.

The media attention surrounding kidnapping cases reached new heights in 1932 when the infant child of Charles and Anne Lindbergh was stolen for ransom. The baby was found dead two and a half months later. The facts of the case are less than clear-cut. When and how did the child die? Did the Bruno Hauptmann really kidnap and kill the Lindbergh's baby? As with the entire book, Fass is not interested in trying to answer these questions, but instead asks what the public fascination with the Lindbergh case tells us about childhood. These are important questions and Fass offers insights into them, but here again she oversteps her evidence. She concludes that the commercial exploitation of the Lindbergh's tragedy, "brought to an end the innocent view of children fashioned in the nineteenth century out of religious sentiment, enlightenment philosophy, and a commitment to moral progress" (p. 131). It seems to me that this statement can be maintained only if one believes that humanitarian sentiments and the ideals of progress were created despite commercial developments, rather than as part of them. Based on Fass' own evidence, and work from other scholars in the history of childhood such as Viviana Zelizer, one might conclude that the Lindbergh case intensified (rather than ended) the sentimentalization of childhood.¹ More troubling still, this claim runs counter to the connection that Fass tries to make between the intense desire to protect children from the world and the commercial production of kidnapping narratives.

The interpretations offered in the second half of *Kidnapped* are generally more consistent and more persuasive. Fass begins by focusing on two very different types of abduction stories—infants taken from nurseries by neurotic women and children molested and murdered by male predators. First, Fass examines the case of Betty Jean Benedicto who abducted and then safely returned a baby named Robert Marcus in 1955. As the story was rendered at the time, Benedicto stole the baby from the hospital because she could not bear children of her own and thus felt that she could not be a complete woman. Fass effectively relates this case to larger trends in the postwar construction of womanhood. She concludes, "unlike male kidnapers, even

psychologically unhinged ones (especially psychologically unhinged ones), female kidnappers were not dangerous, merely nutty. They were like ordinary mothers, but with a few screws loose" (p. 146).

To clarify how abduction narratives were gendered in the 1950s, Fass reconstructs how the more diabolic threat posed by male sexual predators was reinforced and elaborated by the murder of fourteen-year-old Stephanie Bryan by Bud Abbott in 1955. Abbott was slight man weakened by the loss of a lung to tuberculosis. Abbott's physical disabilities became very important for those trying to understand his crime. Some commentators even suggested he was a weak undersexed man who became a sexual predator to compensate for his lack of true manliness. The Bryan murder case presents an especially telling example of how gender and sex had taken a central place in abduction narratives because the material evidence from the Stephanie's body did not show that she had been raped. Yet, many commentators, including the trial lawyers, only needed to hear that the victim was a teenaged girl and the perpetrator was a man, and they began to build a sexual motive. In one of the strongest parts of the book, Fass explains that just as Benedicto's "baby hunger" was rendered sensible in terms of her supposed deficient womanhood, Abbott's sexual perversion was understood in terms of his physical weakness.

Kidnapped addresses next the most common type of kidnapping, parental abduction. Fass explains that over the past century the taking of children by one parent from the other had not been part of legal or popular discourses on stranger abductions. Parental abduction was only the topic of news when it happened to elite dynasties such as the Vanderbilts. However, with the increase in divorce proceedings in the 1970s and the greater media coverage of the family disputes of ordinary people, our understandings of parental abduction changed. It became criminalized by the states and the federal government intervened to help parents locate children taken by their parents.

Fass rightly points out that the incidence of parental abduction has not been the most significant issue. She persuasively shows that the last three decades have brought changes in how we handle and understand family dissolution, including the act of parents taking children. There have been various themes in parental narratives. The courts are often depicted as overbearing or helpless, as incompetent or as the font of justice. Abductors are portrayed as sinister strangers, or on the contrary as heroes, bucking the law to save their child from abuse. Amid this variety, Fass argues that the stories of parental abduction commonly, "dethroned the conventional family and legitimize the family changes of the 1970s and 1980s, proposing that these changes are healthful and therapeutic" (p. 195). This conclusion is supported

most clearly by stories where good parents fight evil ones to break free of horrible relationships and to build a better life for their children by forming new, sometimes non-nuclear households.

Fass believes that airing the troubles of family life, “exploded the myth of family security” (p. 211). One might wonder, though, if the publicity about parental abductions might have allowed cultural currents to run in the opposite direction as well. Might some readers of these stories concluded that families suddenly went awry when gender roles were challenged in the 1960s and 1970s? Such beliefs might be encouraged by the habitual claim that parental abductions were a new scourge on the nation. When I discuss these issues with students, one of their most common claims is that feminism has “caused” this or that “new” family problem. If these types of ideas can be drawn from the rush of sordid parental abductions stories, then they may have provided grist for a conservative critique of the right to divorce and played into what Stephanie Coontz has called the “nostalgia trap.”²

By taking her story into the present in the final two chapters, Fass successfully pursues a task that most historians avoid. She explicitly links the past century of kidnapping narratives to present ones. This is also the most effective part of the book in the way it integrates newspaper accounts and other mass media with academic literature, government reports, and personal interviews. In the final chapter she argues that as sexual taboos loosened for adults in the 1970s and 1980s, the prohibitions against adults having sex with children and youths became tighter. In turn, the breaking of such taboos became more fear inspiring, more disgusting. These cultural shifts contributed to and resulted from the alarmist aspects (the exaggerated statistics and use of plague metaphors) of our efforts to protect children in the 1980s by increasing awareness of abduction, incest, and other types of sexual abuse.

In Fass’ view, the missing children’s movement has had some negative consequences. Although she respects the desperate desire of parents to use any means to find their children, she wonders if publicity may seal the fate of some abducted children because molesters may choose to murder them rather than to be found in possession of the child. More to her main concerns, she argues that as the campaigns, the fliers, and the photos on milk cartons became commonplace, we:

began to adapt to the sight of these pictures, scarcely noticing their distinct characteristics, quickly glancing at the vital information—date of birth, size, and other evanescent physical characteristics—but registering very little of the individual contained within. What was left behind was an oppressive anxiety and a sense of child endangerment, but no real means to defeat the enemy who seemed everywhere. (p. 237)

This is the heart of Fass' cultural critique of what we have made of kidnapping in America. It is from this perspective that she asks why we extend our most strenuous efforts to save children who are missing when the urgent needs of so many children in our midst go unmet. Without denying the "true horror" of child abduction she concludes that kidnapping narratives "deflect our attention from more common and less dramatic dangers and wound our ability to respond to the horrors that are more banal" (p. 262). Like many insights offered in *Kidnapped*, this is an important observation indeed, and it gives rise to troubling questions. Visit an inner-city school like those in Cleveland where the ceilings leak and the foundations are cracked, where the security guards are always present, but most of the students drop out. Then ask yourself, why did we waste so much moral outrage on Monica and Bill over the past year? The answer is that some stories can be made easily into hot news or reduced to newsy sound bites. Child abduction stories fit this category, whereas some of the other ways that children are harmed are not so easy to portray or commodify. *Kidnapped* covers new historical territory while it helps us ask and ponder enduring questions about children and modern society. These are the book's strengths and the reasons why historians concerned with families and children will want to make sure that they read it.

Patrick J. Ryan, assistant professor of Historical Studies, University of Texas at Dallas, is currently working on a book about social policies and growing up in twentieth-century America.

1. Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (1985).
2. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992).